

THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

First Class Pre-K

Issue Brief 1, December 2016

Chronic Absenteeism:

Differences between First Class Pre-K Students and Non-First Class Pre-K Students

Background

The mission of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education is to provide state leadership that identifies, promotes, and coordinates services for children, their families, and communities. Housed within the Department of Early Childhood Education, the Office of School Readiness administers Alabama's diverse delivery, voluntary, high quality Pre-K program. Classrooms are funded through a grant process in which sites must meet specific quality standards and abide by rigorous operating guidelines. Alabama's First Class Pre-K program has been awarded the highest quality rating by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for the past 10 years.

Introduction

Absenteeism has serious implications for a child's academic performance and outcomes. On average, students who are absent have been shown to have lower test scores; lower likelihood of being on track in high school, impacting their career and college readiness; lower likelihood of graduating from high school; and lower course grades, derailing their ability for college completion.¹⁻³ The purpose of this issue brief is to examine differences in chronic absenteeism rates between students who received First Class Pre-K and those who did not, among low income students as indicated by receipt of free or reduced price lunch.

Methods

All students who attended kindergarten in the Alabama public school system were classified into cohorts based on the year they completed kindergarten. Children who received First Class Pre-K the previous year were identified. Absenteeism data were analyzed for the 2015/2016 school year for five separate annual cohorts of children. Chronic absenteeism was defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, or 18 or more days absent.³ Percent chronically absent and mean days absent were calculated for each student group (First Class Pre-K and No First Class Pre-K; low income only) for each cohort.

Lost costs result from students being included in school budgets and accounted for in classrooms but not present to participate. Potential lost costs avoided were calculated based on estimated cost per student per day (annual expenditure per student/180 days; \$9,098 in 2014-2015, most recent available data⁴), applying mean days absent difference to the entire student population (i.e., assuming all students had absenteeism rates equal to those observed for First Class Pre-K). Findings are one-year, cross-sectional snapshots for five different groups of low income children.

Findings

For all cohorts assessed, students who received First Class Pre-K had lower rates of chronic absenteeism than did students who did not receive First Class Pre-K. Differences ranged from 0.6% to 3.6% across the five cohorts included in analyses, with the largest differences observed for older children. Potential lost costs avoided ranged from \$438,419 to \$1,598,372, for a total of \$5,403,655 during the 2015/2016 school year. For example, for the 2010 cohort, 7.3% of students who received First Class Pre-K were chronically absent compared to 10.9% of students who did not receive First Class Pre-K, representing a 3.6% difference. Potential lost cost avoided was \$1,598,372, calculated based on a 1.01 day difference applied to the total number of low income students in the cohort.

Table 1: Absenteeism Status for 2010 to 2014 Cohorts during the 2015/2016 School Year; among Low Income Students.

Cohort/ Current Grade	Total Number Students		Chronically Absent			Days Absent			Potential Lost Cost Avoided from Reduced Absenteeism
	FCPK	Non-FCPK	FCPK	Non-FCPK	Difference	FCPK	Non-FCPK	Difference	
2010/7th	2,043	29,267	7.3%	10.9%	3.6%	7.40	8.41	1.01	\$1,598,372
2011/6th	2,329	29,828	7.0%	9.3%	2.3%	7.00	7.79	0.79	\$1,284,033
2012/5th	2,479	32,857	6.8%	8.9%	2.1%	7.05	7.70	0.65	\$1,160,925
2013/4th	2,540	35,459	7.3%	8.9%	1.6%	7.28	7.76	0.48	\$921,906
2014/3rd	2,900	36,527	8.5%	9.1%	0.6%	7.72	7.94	0.22	\$438,419

Notes: Cohort year represents year student completed public kindergarten. Chronic absenteeism was defined as 18 or more absences. Table 1 includes single year absenteeism data for 2010-2014 cohorts. Lost cost calculated at cost to serve per student, per year/180 days (\$9,098 in 2014-2015, most recent available data⁴) multiplied by the days absent difference and the total number of low income students in each cohort.

Implications

Findings from the analyses presented in this issue brief suggest that among low income children, those who received First Class Pre-K were more likely to attend school regularly and less likely to be chronically absent over their elementary school years as compared to those who did not receive First Class Pre-K. These findings were consistent at each grade level, and differences were greater for the oldest group of children. This is a critical observation given the increased educational expectations for older children. Potential lost costs avoided are conservative estimates based on five grades of students for a single school year and do not include additional administrative burden or social and financial costs that may be associated with chronic absenteeism, including retention in grade, poor academic performance, and school drop out.¹⁻³

Every absence is a missed opportunity for students to learn. Students who attend school regularly have the best chance to benefit from instructional programming that supports better student outcomes, including high school completion. Further, chronic absenteeism represents lost costs associated with students for whom educational funding has been allocated yet who are not present in classrooms. Expanding First Class Pre-K represents an opportunity to reduce chronic absenteeism and avoid lost costs.

References:

1. National Forum on Education Statistics. (2009). Every school day counts: The forum guide to collecting and using attendance data (NFES 2009-804). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
2. Ginsburg, A., Jordan, P., & Chang, H. (2014). Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success. Attendance Works. Retrieved from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Absences-Add-Up_090114-1-1.pdf
3. Child Trends Data Bank. (2015). Student absenteeism. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/indicators/student-absenteeism/>
4. Alabama State Department of Education. (2015/2016). Quick facts. Retrieved from <http://www.alsde.edu/>